

Surcharge rankles Qwest customers

By KEN HEDLER
The Daily Courier

PRESCOTT - Qwest, which began offering long-distance phone service in Arizona about 11 months ago, has been trying to entice customers with a rate of five cents a minute for long-distance calls.

However, Qwest later tacked on \$2.99 per month for long-distance subscribers, and some of them have complained to the Arizona Corporation Commission.

The number of complaints about Qwest to the ACC rose from 97 in

August to 218 in September. Commissioner Kris Mayes said following a meeting Friday in Prescott. Mayes indicated that she attributes the growing number of complaints about Qwest in part to the new fees.

The ACC is conducting a series of meetings throughout the state on telecommunications company billing practices and a proposed policy to govern the ability of telecom companies to share with other companies information about customers.

The ACC conducted a half-hour meeting on the two issues Friday evening in the Yavapai County supervisors boardroom in Prescott. Mayes was the only one of the five commissioners who attended the meeting, which drew six people: two staffers from the ACC, two Qwest representatives, a Qwest customer and Mayes' mother, Karen.

Mayes, a Prescott native and ACC appointee who was elected to her first term Tuesday, said the fees bring

up the issue of "truth in billing," and characterized them as "sneaky" fees or surcharges. She added that she found out about the fees from a reporter at the Arizona Republic - her former employer - who showed her his long-distance bill.

"I asked our staff to look at that issue," she said. She added that Qwest should suspend the fees, which include a 99-cent interstate service charge, until the ACC has a chance to review them.

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Qwest customer Bill Richards, a retired aerospace engineer who lives in Prescott, said that he was "shocked and dismayed" about the additional fees that appear on his monthly bills.

Mayes commented that "it is one thing to raise rates. It is another thing to broadside people."

She said after the meet-

ing that she expects the ACC to decide the fate of the fees in several months, following a public hearing before an administrative law judge. No other commissioners attended the meeting in Prescott because of illnesses or scheduling conflicts.

Qwest officials Alex Juarez of Phoenix and

David Lynch of Prescott attended Friday's meeting, but they did not speak and referred comments to public relations director Jeff Mirasola. Mirasola and other Qwest officials were unavailable for comment.

Contact the reporter at
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